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The Effects of Confidentiality on the Distribution of Naval Performance Appraisals

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A Comparison of Confidential vs. Non-Confidential Performance Appraisals

Robert D. Pritchard, Lawrence H. Peters, Alma F. Harris [1]

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Most performance appraisals which are utilized in personnel decisions are, by their very nature, nonconfidential. That is, the results of the appraisals are seen by individuals in the organization who make important decisions about the person being appraised. This creates various problems for the person doing the appraisal. Of particular interest is the dilemma the appraiser faces of on the one hand wanting to give accurate appraisals, but on the other hand wanting his subordinates to fare well in the allocation of such organizational rewards as pay raises & promotions.

This problem is particularly pertinant to military performance appraisals (Thomas, 1968; Royale, James, and Robertson, 1972). The apparent resolution of this dilemma in military performance appraisals is for supervisors to rate their subordinates very highly. In fact, a rating below the mid-point of the scale is generally to be considered the "kiss of death."

We have heard it argued that this problem of strong skewness and lack of discrimination would be substantially improved if performance appraisals were confidential. That is, if the person doing the appraisal knew that the information would not be seen by the organization, raters would demonstrate that they can indeed discriminate different levels of performance. Unfortunately, no one in these informal discussions has been able to produce any actual data relevant to this question. In fact, it appears that this question has received no attention in the psychological literature at all.

The purpose of this paper is to present such data. Specifically, comparisons are made between performance appraisals made under confidental conditions with those under more typical nonconfidential conditions.

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1. We would like to thank Lloyd D. Marquardt and Clarence W. Von Bergen, Jr., for aiding in the data collection.

METHOD

The confidential performance appraisals were collected from the supervisors of a sample of Naval enlisted personnel stationed aboard ship in the summer of 1972. When completing the 10-point unidimensional performance appraisal, supervisors were asked to give their name and the name of the subordinate being rated. The instructions stated "Your rating of this individual will be strictly confidential. It will be used for research purposes only, and will in no way affect the individual being rated. No one in the Navy will ever see this rating." (Emphasis in original.) The rater was told to indicate how the overall job performance of the ratee compared with that of other enlisted personnel in the same job. The 10-point scale was anchored on one side by statements of "Better than 10 out of 100," "Better than 20 out of 100," ... "Better than 90 out of 100." The other side of the scale displayed the following anchors: "Exceptionally Superior," "Superior," "Average," "Below Average," and "Extremely Poor."

Usable responses were collected for 504 enlisted personnel ranging from a rank of E-2 (fresh out of basic training) to E-9 (Chief Petty Officer - averaging 22 years in the Navy).

The nonconfidential comparison data came from a report by Thomas (1968). Her data represent a sample of almost 34,000 Navy performance appraisals (NAVPERS 792) done in 1967. This official Navy performance appraisal instrument consists of five dimensions: Professional Performance, Military Behavior, Leadership and Supervisory Ability, Military Appearance, and Adaptability. Each dimension has five verbal anchors. For example, the anchor for the positive end of the Professional Performance dimension reads, "Extremely effective and reliable. Works well on his own." The extreme negative anchor reads, "Inadequate. Needs constant supervision." Under each of the five anchors are two boxes, one

being more positive than the other. Thus, the ratee checks one of 10 boxes (2 boxes for each of the five anchors.)

RESULTS

Frequency distributions of the two sets of ratings are presented in Figure 1. Since both instruments utilize 10-point scales, the absissa of the figure uses the points of only one of the scales (the confidential scale). Data from the confidential sample is a straightforward frequency distribution of scores obtained. The nonconfidential distribution is the distribution of all ratings received on all five dimensions. (Inspection of data presented in Thomas, 1968, indicates that there is no appreciable difference in the distribution of the 5 separate performance dimensions on the original Navy ratings.)

Inspection of the distributions in Figure 1 clearly indicates that the confidential ratings produced a different distribution of scores than did the nonconfidential ratings.[2] Specifically, the confidential ratings showed much less skew and greater discrimination, especially in the upper half of the scale. Furthermore, there were more cases receiving low ratings in the confidential data. Four point two percent of the cases received one of the lowest three ratings in the confidential sample; this figure was only .6% in the nonconfidential sample. Finally, the two most frequently used ratings in the nonconfidential sample comprised 55% of the cases, while the analogous percentage for the confidential sample was 37.3%.

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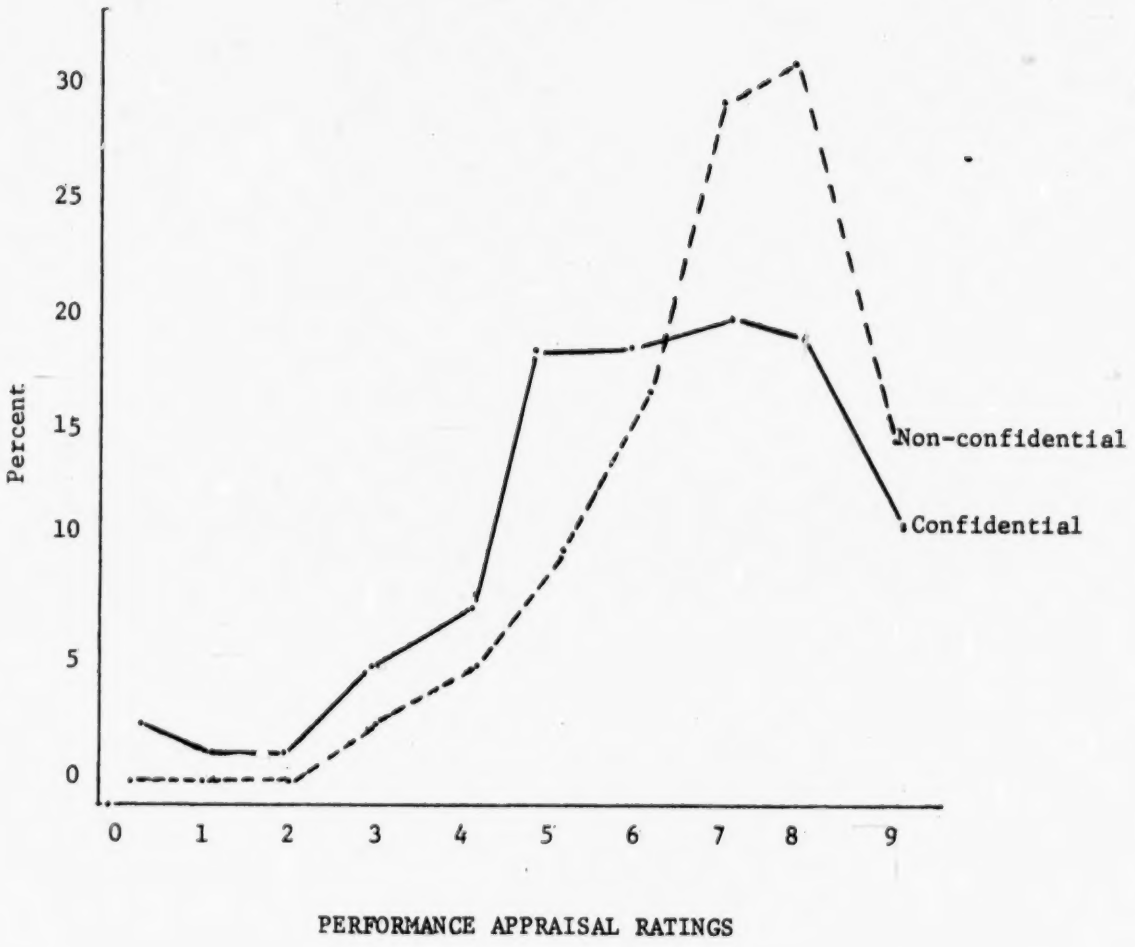
2. It should be noted that the distributions of ranks in the confidential sample was almost identical to that in the nonconfidential sample. Mean rank (E level) for the nonconfidential sample was 4.47 and 4.21 for the confidential sample.

Figure 1. Frequency distributions of confidential and non-confidential performance ratings.



These interpretations are strengthened by the descriptive statistics of the two distributions. The mean and standard deviation of the non-confidential sample are 7.0 and 1.50 respectively, while the statistics for the confidential sample are 6.3 and 1.99.

DISCUSSION

The data indicate that performance appraisals under confidential conditions produced greater discrimination and less negative skew than performance appraisals under non-confidential conditions. Apparently, then, raters are able, at least in this sample, to discriminate between levels of job performance, but do not do so when their ratings are not confidential. Presumably the potential negative consequences to the ratee serve to bias the ratings. In addition, there is some evidence that pressures exist from a rater's supervisor to produce high ratings for his (the rater's) subordinates (McCormick, personal communication). These two sets of pressures, separately or in combination could very well result in the positive rating bias observed.

These findings suggest that the discrimination in ratings may be improved as they become more and more confidential. While complete confidentiality may well be impossible for the organization's personnel decisions, confidentiality should at least be employed when performance appraisals are to be used for research purposes, and when the purpose of the appraisal is solely to give feedback to the person being appraised.

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